The Fourth Church Pulpit

FAITH AND YOUR DEMONS

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: 1 John 4:16-21, Mark 1:21-28

"What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."
Mark 1:27b (NRSV)

Sometimes it seems that life is out of control. Or, perhaps more accurately, it seems that someone or something other than me is in control of life. Occasionally I entertain the notion that whoever is really in control is whimsical, has a sense of humor, and sends us little reminders to help keep things in perspective. Several weeks ago, the Sunday morning church bulletin contained on the back page the complete calender of events for the *prior* week. Now, if you only knew how we struggle with the calendar, keeping it orderly and accurate, making sure that there are no conflicts, or omissions, making very certain that every program gets equal and accurate booking. Even though we know better theologically, we do on occasion around here sound as if the Kingdom of God on earth will collapse if we don't get the weekly calendar of events at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago right. And so, I like to think that it was a benevolent spirit — a whimsical demon — who did it to us as a kind of affectionate reminder.

Sometimes it seems to me that one of the spirits which exercises real power and authority in life is electronic. High tech electronic: answering machines, for instance, beepers, cellular phones, fax machines, E-mail, and, of course, the computer. Martin Marty picked up a delightful item from a personal computer magazine and wrote a column, "Pothole on the Information Highway" for the *Christian Century* recently.

> "To produce a bulletin for the funeral of a woman named Edna, the church secretary merely updated the bulletin from a prior funeral (of a woman named Mary) by using the computer's search-and-replace feature to replace the word 'Mary' with the name 'Edna.' Imagine the suppressed giggles when the mourners, dutifully following along in the Apostles' Creed, read that Christ 'was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Edna.'"
> [*Christian Century,* 4/13/94]

The topic is demons — the demonic. The topic plays a major role in the New Testament. There is a sense in which you cannot understand the story of Jesus without it. No less an authority than the late Paul Tillich, one of the most influential thinkers of our century, concluded that the stories of Jesus and the evil or unclean spirits were among the most important — and useful — contributions Christianity has to make to human well-being and health.

But surely you're not proposing that there are actually evil spirits — demons about, are you? No, I'm not. But that doesn't conclude the matter. In his study of the life of Jesus, Professor John Dominic Crossan of DePaul University speaks for many of us — and for me — when he writes:

> "I do not believe that there are personal supernatural spirits who invade our bodies from the outside, and, for either good or evil, replace or jostle with our own personality."
> [*Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography,* p. 85]

But Professor Crossan points out:

> "The vast, vast majority of the world's people have always so believed, and according to one recent cross-cultural survey, about seventy percent still do." And so Crossan advises his students and readers that it is "absolutely not acceptable to say, 'I don't believe in demons' and think that explains everything."

It is how Mark chooses to begin the story. Think again about the vignette in our text. Jesus of Nazareth has just recruited four men to follow him as he set out to announce the presence of the Kingdom of God on earth and the first m on the agenda is, "By what authority is he making this announcement?" He seems to have taken up temporary residence with Simon Peter, in Capernaum. On the Sabbath, they did what all good Jews did, they went to Synagogue. And because he was a teacher with a bit of a reputation, Jesus was given the opportunity to speak, or teach the law and its meaning. Now there was a way you were supposed to do that, namely by citing precedent and

illustrating with quotations. A teacher — a scribe — would make a point about a law — say, keeping the Sabbath. He would refer to test cases in the past, document how other rabbis and scribes had handled the issues, and quote authoritative figures. It was not unlike what an attorney does in a court of law. The people of Capernaum, Mark reports, were astonished because Jesus taught as one having authority and not as the scribes. What we think that means is that Jesus didn't cite precedent and quote other authorities. He assumed for himself the right to teach the law of God. The scribes pointed to other authorities. Jesus apparently said,

> "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you. . . ."

In the middle of that drama, that presumptuous assumption of authority, a man Mark describes as having an unclean spirit calls out,

> "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" And then, remarkably, Mark says the man, or the unclean spirit in him, recognizes who Jesus is . . . "the Holy One of God."

We're just at the beginning of the story and this bizarre character already knows the conclusion.

Jesus rebukes the spirit. It leaves the man — who we presume is now fit for polite company again. The people are truly amazed and ask the question Mark wants us to ask — "What is this? A new teaching!"

What's going on here? Who was this man? What is wrong with him and what did Jesus do for him? And, does it have anything at all to do with modern life? Most scholars believe he was a victim of serious mental illness; that what the New Testament calls an unclean spirit or a demon we would diagnose as acute schizophrenia or paranoia. In his analysis of what is actually going on in texts like this, Professor Crossan is very helpful by differentiating between a disease and an illness. Disease, he says, is biological malfunction. Illness is the perception of the disease by its victim and by the community. Thus a skin disease brought with it social isolation, banishment from the community which in time often made the victim much sicker. In the case of mental illness, bizarre behavior frightened the community which then ridiculed the person and banished him from society with the predictable result that the disease got worse. Part of the excruciating difficulty in dealing with the homeless poor is that many of them are clinically mentally ill. Their behavior is unsettling to the rest of us, so we back away, avert our eyes, isolate, which in time escalates and worsens the mental illness.

Jesus simply refused to abide by his society's traditional ways of dealing with sick people by isolating them. Rather he welcomed them. He has a conversation with the unclean spirit — I like to think of it as a consultation with a therapist. The man gets better. Jesus, Professor Crossan suggests, heals illnesses and in the process diseases are cured. Does that diminish the miraculous? No, he says.

> "Miracles are not changes in the physical world so much as changes in the social world." [p. 82]

Paul Tillich suggested that this might be the most useful topic in the Bible. Tillich was among the first academicians to explore the connections between guilt, forgiveness, and physical and emotional well-being. He said that when Jesus one time forgave a man his sins and then healed his illness, he was encompassing much of what psychology and psychiatry have learned in the twentieth century.

His friend and student, Rollo May, distinguished psychiatrist, deals with the topic very helpfully in his book, *Love And Will*. The ancients believed that the demonic was the source of human creativity and passion. Plato talked about the divine madness of the poet. And it was Rilke, the poet, who discontinued psychotherapy because he thought if his demons were banished his angels, his creativity, would disappear as well.

Van Gogh, Michelangelo, Nietzsche were possessed, driven; you could call them "mad."

Rollo May writes,

> "The demonic is any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person. Sex and Eros, anger and rage, the craving for power are examples. The demonic can be either creative or destructive and is normally both." [p. 123] "Violence," May says, "is the demonic gone awry. It is demon possession in its starkest form."

There is a perfectly wonderful moment that happens at the Chicago Stadium, as the starting lineup for the Bulls is announced. The Stadium is suddenly and totally darkened: thunderous refrains of rock music assault your ears, bright circles of light flash over the crowd, appearing and disappearing, revealing standing, whistling, clapping Chicagoans: lawyers, bankers, nurses, bus drivers, homemakers, everybody; and as the announcer says — "And now, your Chicago Bulls," and the noise crescendos even louder, you find that you are on your feet, lost in this amazing moment. And it has something to do with the outcome. We had some trouble with the unclean spirits of Madison Square Garden last week and the Knicks had equal trouble with the spirits of Chicago Stadium.

It is a great moment. But in structure, if not in result, it is not unlike what Adolf Hitler orchestrated in Nuremberg with heroic music, spotlights, banners and flags, invocations of the nation's mythical past, its spiritual and racial superiority. If Rollo May is right that the demonic is the power of a natural instinct or function to take over the whole person, the results can be violent and tragic. Interestingly, Paul Tillich, who left Germany for this very reason, returned for a visit in the mid-thirties and came back to America warning our scholarly community that something demonically evil was happening and was laughed at. This is the age of reason and science, he was told. People know better than to take Hitler's rantings and ravings seriously.

People caught up in the Los Angeles riot tried to use the power of the crowd, the demonic if you will, as a legal defense, claiming that they were not personally responsible for their behavior. And the cover of *Time Magazine* last week, reporting on the unimaginable terror of Rwanda, quoted a missionary:

> "There are no devils left in hell. They are all in Rwanda."

Do you wonder, as I do, how it is possible for people to be so violent, to seem to have no regard for life? Professor Crossan provides a helpful way to understand a little bit of what is happening in Rwanda by observing that political oppression seems to stimulate the demonic. Crossan believes that Roman occupation and Jewish suffering under oppression gave rise to an epidemic of what we would call emotional or mental illness and what they called evil spirits. *Time Magazine* reported the fact that the people who are killing each other — Tutsis and Hutus — lived peacefully for centuries until white Europeans made them colonial subjects and systematically favored the minority Tutsis who were taller, with lighter skin, and to European eyes more attractive. One social interpretation is that the unbelievable horror is a direct result of centuries of political oppression. The same analysis can be made of South African violence under apartheid and Serbian/Bosnian violence under centuries of political oppression, most recently Marxist.

When Paul Tillich delivered the graduation address at Union Theological Seminary, he told the would-be clergy that the most important part of their job would be to cast out demons. My guess is that his listeners were shocked. Union is a high-powered center of academic inquiry. Students expect to engage in sociological and psychological analysis of the structures of society and their hopes are to help bring in God's Kingdom by working for justice and peace in the political arena. My guess is that they didn't expect the most distinguished Christian intellectual in the world to tell them that their first responsibility was to help individuals name their demons and cast them out. [*The Shaking Of The Foundations*, p. 59]

Naming is important. There is an intriguing dialogue always between Jesus and the unclean spirits. They know who he is. They understand his authority when no one else does. He knows them, too. He names them. Naming is critical. We understand the dynamic and collaborate with it when we go to the doctor's office. We bring symptoms; something hurts; something isn't right and we don't feel good and we're very worried if the truth were known, that there is a critical, life-threatening condition lurking in us. And we start to feel a little better when the doctor says, "Aha, that's it," and gives our mysterious malady a name, and recognizing it seems less threatening. The physician in naming it has some authority over it and so do we.

And so the point to which this exercise has been heading — your demons. Do you know them? Can you name them? Are you aware of those natural instincts, gifts, functions, which have power to "take over the whole person"? Are they healthy spirits, creative demons — your art, your love, your passion, your commitment? Or do they on occasion become unhealthy: do they rule your life in ways that feel destructive, that hurt others, hurt yourself — your health and wholeness?

I think a good metaphor for demons is our addictions, our compulsive behaviors that can be amusing and endearing, but can also be deadly.

In a popular new book, *Money And The Meaning Of Life,* Jacob Needleman suggests that the traditional notion of hell as a place of unending torment is what an addiction feels like. He remembers that in Dante's classic, *The Divine Comedy,* the author

> "descends into Hell and feels pity for the people he sees there, writhing in pain. His guide, the great poet Virgil admonishes him not to feel pity. After all, they are getting exactly what they want." Needleman says, "Hell is the state in which we are barred from receiving what we truly need because of the value we give to what we merely want." [p. 27]

We can be addicted to money, security, recognition or power. We can be addicted to alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, or heroin, but also caffeine. We can be addicted to sex, food and new clothes and work, especially to work: and we can be addicted to — which means we so desperately need it that we'll do anything to get it — acceptance, approval, a sense of at-oneness with ourselves and our world. We have a word for it — co-dependence: the demon of the nineties. This is how Anne Wilson Schaef describes it:

> "She gets her identity completely from outside herself. He has no esteem or self-worth: he spends much of his time trying to figure out what others want so he can give it to them. She is lonely because she is estranged from herself. He is controlling because he has no self and is so dependent on others." [*Co-Dependence Misunderstood — Mistreated,* p. 35]

My guess is that everyone of us can find something of ourselves in that paragraph and that there are behaviors which we may only know semi-consciously, yet we experience their destructiveness and pain:

- our love which becomes possessiveness.
- our concern for our children's welfare which becomes controlling.
- our commitment to our own agenda which becomes manipulative of others.
- our sense of our own identity which becomes insensitive to others.
- our love of our own nation, race, family which can become dismissive and ugly and violent toward those who are not "ours."
- our anger which we know could become violent.
- our resentment that becomes a deeply divisive and a permanent emotional separation.
- or maybe it is chemical — or sexual — or financial.
- Jesus recognized the unclean spirit — named it — rebuked it.

It's called exorcism and the word, unfortunately, is defined by Hollywood. Actually, it is simple.

It's a matter of having the courage to name it, your unhealthy demon, whatever it is. Name it, and let it go. Hold it, and then open your hand, and turn it over to someone with authority, someone with ultimate authority, someone the text calls the Holy One.

Professor Tillich, in the address I cited earlier, urged the young clergy to go into the world to cast out demons and then, in conclusion, he focused on their own spirits.

> "Faith," he said, "means being grasped by a power that is greater than we are, a power that shakes us and turns us, and transforms us and heals us. Surrender to the power of faith."

"Surrender to Jesus," the distinguished scholar said.

It is what faith means, finally. Opening your hands: letting go of whatever you are clutching, clasping so tightly, and receiving what he offers: newness, healing, wholeness, new in every age, in every life.

Yes, this is a new teaching. This is one with authority. To know him, to trust him, to entrust to him our lives, our past, present and future is to become whole. It is our salvation.

Amen.

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O God, you know us completely. We have no secrets from you. You know how hard we work and how desperately we want to succeed and to be effective. You know how much we need to be appreciated and loved.

In the quiet of these moments give us courage to turn all of it over to your son, and to receive from him what we need: your love, your acceptance, your spirit of newness and grace and fullness and joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.